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Vigors, Belinda; Lawrence, AB

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Animal health and natural behaviours: how important are they for farm animal well-being?

Findings from a survey with Livestock Farmers and Members of the Public



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Belinda Vigors and Alistair Lawrence

Animal Behaviour and Welfare,
Scotland's Rural College,
Roslin Institute Building,
EH25 9RG

belinda.vigors@sruc.ac.uk

Summary

When it comes to animal welfare, previous research has found livestock farmers and members of the public (MOP) tend to differ in the emphasis they give to health and natural behaviours. Farmers often place more importance on minimising health issues and MOP on promoting natural behaviours. However, this study has shown that there may be more similarities than there are differences between both groups. It finds that farmers and MOP both want animals to be free from health issues and able to express their natural behaviours. In addition, both consider welfare to be lower if health issues are not minimised, even if natural behaviours are simultaneously supported. However, farmers do judge situations where health issues are not minimised but natural behaviours are supported more negatively than MOP. This may be indicative of the greater emphasis farmers give to minimising health issues and the greater weight MOP give to natural behaviours. The study also finds several individual characteristics (e.g. dietary preferences, farming sector, belief in animal mind) underlie and influence how some individuals judge the welfare of animals. The findings of this study are thus relevant to better understanding the expectations of farmers and MOP and what they consider is important for animal welfare.



Background

Minimising health issues and **promoting natural behaviours** are two important aspects of good husbandry and welfare on livestock farms. There is much research which finds that livestock farmers and members of the public (MOP) differ in the importance they give to them. **Livestock farmers tend to focus on minimising harms such as health issues and stress while MOP tend to focus on 'naturalness' such as outdoor access and opportunities to express natural behaviours.**

However, **is the difference in priorities between livestock farmers and MOP this clear-cut?** Livestock farmers and MOP may have different attitudes to the importance of health and natural behaviours but it is also possible that what they consider is important for animal welfare depends on the situation an animal is in. This study developed a survey to examine this.

Study Aims

01

To explore whether there are differences in the overall importance livestock farmers and MOP give to health and natural behaviours

02

To examine how judgments of animal welfare may be influenced by the extent to which (i) health issues are minimised and (ii) natural behaviours promoted.

Participants

810 MOP from UK

168 Livestock Farmers from UK and Republic of Ireland



The Survey



1



Attitudes to the importance of health and natural behaviours

- Participants asked to rate (from 0-10) how important they considered (i) minimising health issues and (ii) promoting natural behaviours are for animal well-being.
- Participants were asked, if they had to choose between the two, which they thought was most important for animal well-being: minimising health issues or promoting natural behaviours

2



Impact of health and natural behaviours on assessments of animal well-being

Participants were presented with a scenario describing how the *minimisation of health issues* and the *promotion of natural behaviours* were managed on a (hypothetical) livestock farm. The scenario described one of the following situations:

- Farm 1: Health issues were minimised and natural behaviours were not promoted
- Farm 2: Health issues were minimised and natural behaviours were promoted
- Farm 3: Health issues were not minimised and natural behaviours were not promoted
- Farm 4: Health issues were not minimised and natural behaviours were promoted

Based on the information provided in the scenario they were asked how they would rate (from 0 to 10) the overall well-being, physical health, mental health and productivity of the livestock on this farm.

3



Individual Characteristics

- Gender
- Age
- Highest level of education
- Annual household income
- Dietary preferences
- Geographic region / country
- Belief in animal mind (i.e sentience)

Additional for MOP

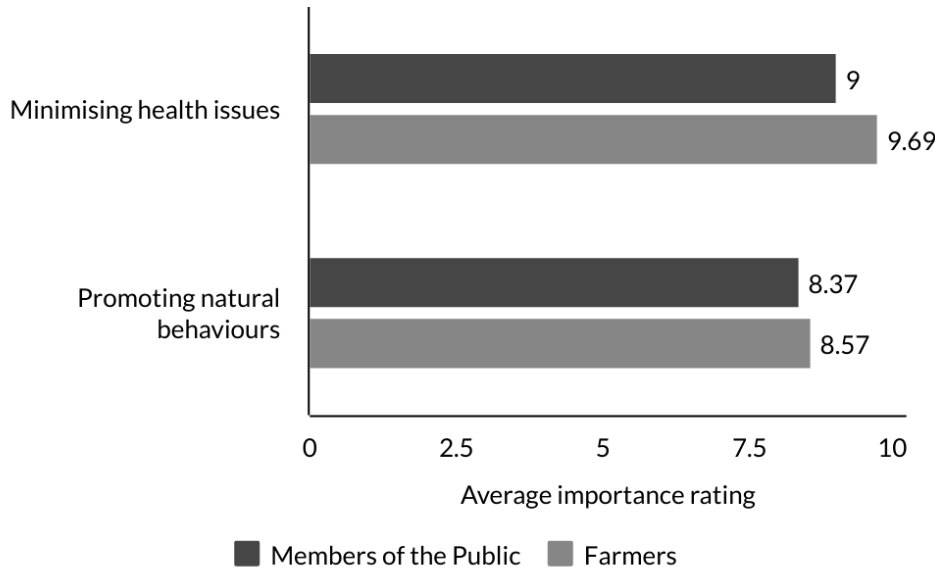
- Experience of livestock farming

Additional for Farmers

- Sector
- Years farming
- Number of animals
- Type of farm business
- Non-organic / organic
- Farm assurance membership
- Management system
- Farm input intensity

Key Findings

Rating of the importance of 'minimising health issues' and 'promoting natural behaviours' for farm animal well-being



64%
Of MOP
selected 'minimising health issues' as the most important factor for animal well-being

88%
Of Farmers
selected 'minimising health issues' as the most important factor for animal well-being

Animals should be healthy and able to express natural behaviours

This was the view of both farmers and MOP. Assessments of the overall well-being of animals were highest for the scenario where *both* health issues were minimised and natural behaviours promoted (see 'Farm 2' figure on right).

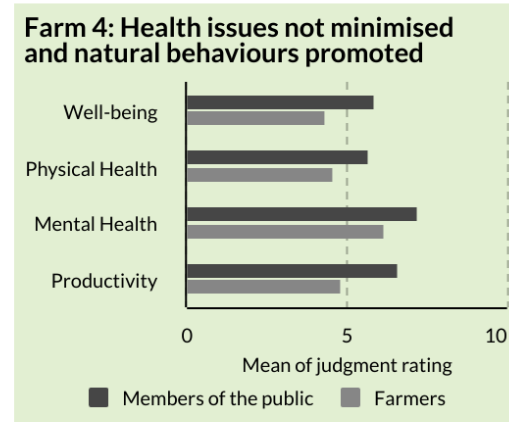
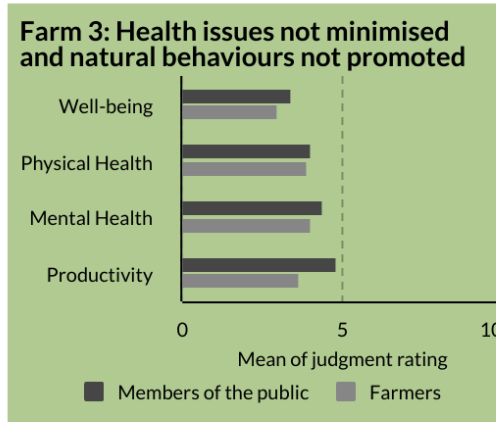
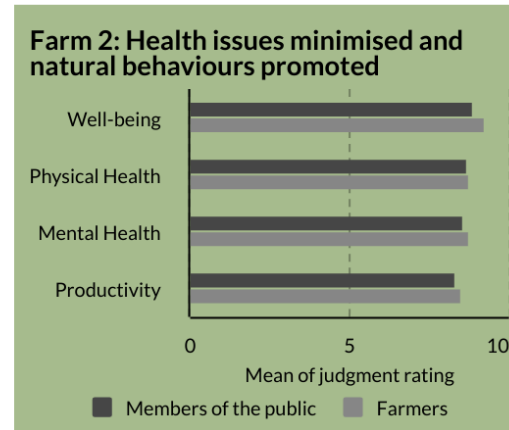
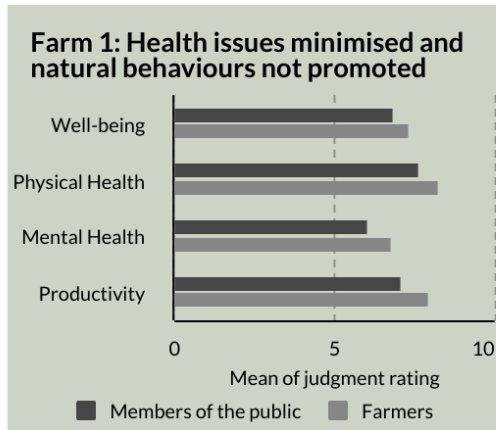
Health had greatest impact on judgments of welfare

When it came to assessing the overall well-being, physical health and productivity of the animals in the different scenarios, the level of health provision (i.e. health issues minimised / not minimised) influenced MOP and farmers judgments more than any other factor. However, whether natural behaviours were supported or not had the greatest impact on MOP's rating of animal mental health. Natural behaviours also significantly influenced farmers' judgments of mental health but not as much as health.

Natural behaviours had greater impact on MOP's assessments of welfare, than farmers'

When assessing the welfare of the animals in the scenario, the extent to which natural behaviours were supported had more of an impact on MOP's judgments than farmers'. This is particularly evident in assessments of farm 4 (figure to right) where health issues were not minimised *but* natural behaviours were promoted. Here, MOP gave more positive ratings than farmers.

How participants assessed the well-being, physical health, mental health and productivity of animals under different conditions of health and natural behaviours



Influence of individual characteristics

Members of the Public



Gender

Females more likely than males to give a higher rating for the 'importance of promoting natural behaviours'.



Belief in Animal Mind

Having a greater belief in animal mind increased the likelihood of rating both the importance of health and natural behaviours higher.

Individuals with higher belief in animal mind judged the overall well-being and mental health of the animals in the hypothetical scenarios more negatively.



Dietary Preferences

Vegetarians, vegans and flexitarians were more likely to give a higher rating for the 'importance of promoting natural behaviours' than meat-eaters.

Vegetarians, vegans, pescatarians (i.e. eat fish but not meat) and flexitarians also judged the welfare of the animals in the hypothetical scenarios more negatively than meat-eaters.



Experience of farming

Growing up on a farm increased the likelihood of giving a lower rating for the 'importance of promoting natural behaviours'.

Livestock Farmers



Gender

Females more likely than males to give a higher rating for the 'importance of promoting natural behaviours'.



Belief in Animal Mind

Farmers with a greater belief in animal mind rated the ability of the animals in the scenarios to be productive higher than those with a lower belief in animal mind.



Management System

Individuals who kept their animals outdoors all-year round were more likely to rate the importance of natural behaviours higher, than individuals who kept their animals indoor for some of the year and outdoor for some of the year.



Sector

Beef farmers judged the overall well-being, physical health and productivity of the animals in the hypothetical scenarios more positively than farmers from other sectors.

Dairy farmers judged the mental health of the animals in the scenarios more negatively than farmers from other sectors.



Business Type

Having a family-run farm or commercial partnership was associated with more positive judgments of animal well-being, physical health and mental health in the scenarios

Those with a family-run farm also judged the productivity of the animals in the scenarios more positively.



Conclusions

There is a general view, within society, that farmers tend to focus more on minimising health issues and MOP tend to focus more on 'naturalness' in their approaches to farm animal welfare. This has implications for best practice, as farmers and MOP may have different expectations when it comes to animal welfare.

This study shows that, although there are differences between farmers and MOP, there are also some key similarities. Importantly, it is very clear that both farmers and MOP want farm animals to be **both healthy and able to express their natural behaviours**. This was illustrated by the very positive judgments of the farm 2 scenario, where both health issues are minimised and natural behaviours promoted, and how highly both 'minimising health issues' and 'promoting natural behaviours' are rated as important for animal well-being.

"I believe that physical health and welfare should be considered minimal and that....at least some behavioural expression is integral to animal wellbeing"
(Member of the Public)

The findings also show that **the specific nature of the situation an animal is in, is important to how farmers' and MOP's prioritise health and natural behaviours**. Situations where health issues were minimised were considered better for animal well-being and welfare than those where health issues were not minimised, even if natural behaviours were simultaneously supported. What this may suggest is that both **farmers and MOP's consider minimising health issues to be a priority, or a base-level requirement**, before any benefits from promoting natural behaviours can be gained. This is illustrated by participants' judgments of the farm 4 scenario where health issues were not minimised but natural behaviours were promoted. Here, the welfare-related judgments of both farmers and the public were less positive in comparison to this scenario's opposite; farm 1, where health issues were minimised but natural behaviours were not promoted. However, **farmers did rate the farm 4 scenario more negatively than MOP, in keeping with the greater priority they tend to give to minimising health issues**.

There is also much **more variance amongst farmers in their attitudes** to the importance of health and natural behaviours and their judgments of the different hypothetical scenarios. This perhaps reflects the diversity of livestock farming, where individuals from different sectors, different production systems and farming backgrounds will have different views based on their own personal experiences and values. Indeed, many participating farmers commented that it was difficult to judge the welfare of the animals in the scenarios without knowing more information on the environment the animal's where in (e.g. slatted housing or outdoors). However, there is some **variance amongst MOP's attitudes and judgments based on dietary preferences and belief in animal mind**. Notably, having a greater belief in animal mind, or dietary preferences that reduced or did not include meat, were associated with greater importance being given to natural behaviours and more negative judgments of the scenarios. **This potentially suggests that growth in such dietary preferences and increases in belief in animal mind in the public may lead to a greater emphasis on natural behaviours**.

In summary, there is some support for the general view that farmers place more emphasis on minimising health issues and members of the public on 'naturalness'. However, it is also clear that **both groups consider both factors are integral to animal welfare, where the priority given to them can depend upon an animal's situation**.

"Animals absolutely need to be stress free, pain free and healthy....however efforts must be made to allow natural behaviour as it can enhance farm KPI's" (Pig farmer)

"If the animal is stress, pain and illness free, then overall the vast majority of its needs are being met. The only reason I did not give [this scenario] 10/10 is because the animals could be housed indoor in slats all year around and never get a chance to graze and exhibit their natural behaviour"
(Beef & Sheep Farmer)